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ABSTRACT

The need for adequate language assessment techniques has grown as schools attempt to deal with linguistically different pupils. Many testing procedures have been developed to meet this need; sentence repetition is one such procedure. This paper briefly reviews three issues which have been raised concerning sentence repetition as a language assessment technique: (1) the nature of the repetition process; (2) the "naturalness" of the repetition test format; and (3) the repetition test's capacity to reveal the language competence of children. It is argued that successful sentence repetition involves language processing, not the mere mimicry of syllables, and that within the typical constraints of most testing situations, the repetition technique is as "natural" as other assessment procedures in providing insights into children's language competence. Three possible applications of the repetition technique to specific language testing contexts are briefly reviewed. (Author)

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Sentence Repetition as a Language Assessment Technique: Some Issues and Applications

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The need for adequate language assessment techniques has been increasingly recognized as schools attempt to deal with linguistically different pupils. Recent federal and state legislation as well as judicial interpretations (e.g., Lau vs. Nichols) concerning linguistically different pupil populations have had far-reaching consequences for educational policy makers and practitioners. Language is clearly the primary factor in determining which pupils are to be affected by given educational policies and practices, and it is also a key element in their implementation. The adequate assessment of language becomes, then, an extremely important factor in determining compliance with federal and state guidelines as well as in providing the best possible educational experience for the children in question. To meet the demand for adequate language assessment, researchers and educational practitioners have developed a wide variety of testing procedures. One such procedure involves the presentation of model utterances which are to be repeated by test subjects.

Not too many years ago, sentence repetition was rather widely criticized as being inappropriate for eliciting and assessing oral language behavior. Although it has gained increasing

TM005 321

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respectability, there are still many professionals who view repetition with skepticism. Interestingly, some of the criticism comes from classroom teachers who regard sentence repetition as an appropriate teaching technique but as an inadequate mode of testing. A look at some basic issues related to repetition will perhaps help to clear up some of the misunderstanding concerning this assessment technique.

ISSUES

The Nature of Repetition

Perhaps the most fundamental issue related to sentence repetition as an assessment technique involves the nature of the task. Repetition is frequently equated with imitation or mimicry, both of which connote the meaningless reproduction of a syllable or series of syllables after a model. Mimicry is what a parrot learns to do. It is probably what a baby does when he initially begins imitating his parents' models of "Mama" and "Dada." It may also occur to a limited extent in audio-lingual language classes when students are asked to mimic a series of syllables in a new language without having any notion of what these syllables mean. Mimicry, involving temporary syllable storage and reproduction, appears to occur rather rarely in human experience.

Repetition, as I will use the term here and as I think it is used in language assessment, is, on the other hand, a very different process. It involves both listening comprehension and meaningful reproduction. As Slobin and Welsh (1973) stated, "sentence recognition and imitation are filtered through the individual's productive linguistic system" (p. 496).

A simple means of demonstrating the difference between mimicry and repetition is to ask someone to repeat a sentence from a familiar language, e.g., "A good friend of mine went to Africa," and then ask the same individual to repeat an equally long sentence from an unfamiliar language, e.g., "Baba yangu alitaka kahawa." (Swahili for "My father wanted coffee."). The difference in performance on the two syllable series will be obvious; it is doubtful that an English-speaking subject could successfully mimic the Swahili model sentence without practice. Consider further the difficulty of repeating "Two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun" if the meaning and internal organization of this series of syllables were not clear.

The distinction drawn here between repetition and mimicry is also obvious in the performance of subjects on a repetition test. Data from the performances of school pupils reveal that mimicked responses are readily distinguishable from attempts at repetition, even when the repetitions are only partially successful. Among the factors which aid in distinguishing mimicked from repeated utterances are utterance length and intonation patterns. A test subject may be able to mimic, sometimes quite accurately, the syllables in a short utterance such as "Joe ran home," but the same subject will encounter problems as soon as an utterance is lengthened (e.g., "Joe and his brother watched television last night.") Sound substitutions, syllable metathesis, and mumbling characterize the mimic's performance of the longer utterance.

Intonation, too, plays a tell-tale role in identifying the mimic. Despite the fact that children are often very good at imitating intonation, the mimic's performance on even short utterances is frequently marked by atypical rhythm, stress and pitch. The chances that a test subject could, without being detected, mimic his way through a sentence repetition task in an unfamiliar language are, I am convinced, remote indeed.

"Naturalness"

A second issue which is frequently raised concerning the use of sentence repetition involves the lack of naturalness in the task. It is argued that there are few instances in real-life verbal interactions where an individual is expected to repeat an utterance verbatim after a model. This point can be granted, I think, without discrediting repetition as an oral language assessment technique.

Testing situations which attempt to sample predetermined aspects of behavior are, by their very nature, unnatural. For example, the multiple-choice format, utilized in tests such as the SAT or the GRE, is quite unnatural. We are not usually presented with several alternative responses to a question (e.g., "Is the weather today sunny, cloudy, rainy, windy, all of the above, or none of the above?"), and yet we are reasonably satisfied that such a question format is an appropriate means to tap knowledge in a wide variety of content areas. Similarly, in assessing language competence we must attempt to elicit behaviors which we believe adequately represent natural competence, even though the testing situations we develop may themselves be somewhat unnatural. When

viewed from this perspective, repetition tasks do not differ significantly in "naturalness" from other language testing techniques such as multiple-choice, cloze, question-answer, or even unstructured fluency tests. Critics of repetition usually favor fluency testing or free speech elicitation as a means of approximating the naturalness of everyday speech and thus reflecting more accurately underlying language competence. There is no doubt, however, that the many variables involved in testing (e.g., the location, the interviewer, the recording equipment, and time constraints) reduce naturalness and restrict generalizations we may make concerning the competence of the individual, regardless of the technique employed.

Testing, then, is not a "natural" event. Attempts can, of course, be made to make testing situations seems as natural as possible and to make test subjects feel at ease, but such attempts are by no means limited to any one mode of testing.

Testing Language Competence

The final criticism of repetition tests we will consider here involves the inability of a repetition instrument to tap "true" language competence. It is argued that a repetition task forces subjects to repeat what is not part of their repertoires and prevents them from revealing what is in their repertoires. This criticism relates to both the nature-of-repetition and naturalness arguments just mentioned in that it assumes that subjects act differently, indeed that they act abnormally, when

they perform a repetition task. Performance data do not support this position. Model utterances which conform to subjects' repertoires are usually easily recognized and repeated, and models that differ from their repertoires are typically altered to make them more congruent. Thus, for example, a sentence such as, "David has a toothbrush," might be repeated as "David gotta toofbraf," or a sentence such as, "David puede vestirse solo," becomes "David se puede vistir solo." A subject's inclination to perform in conformity with his internalized grammar does not appear to be inhibited by the repetition format.

Some of the dissatisfaction with repetition as a means of assessing "true" language competence may reflect a more general frustration with the constraints under which most real-life testing must be conducted. In an exploratory research setting the researcher may choose to devote hundreds of hours to recording and analyzing the language of a single subject in order to achieve an accurate and complete description of that subject's grammar. Language testing, on the other hand, is usually designed to satisfy immediate and utilitarian objectives, and it must be, above all, efficient. There will always be specific skills and competencies which a given test fails to measure, but as long as the test aids us in successfully attaining the objective for which it is administered, we can be satisfied with the behaviors it selects to sample. Thus, if we administer a language placement test to a group of first-grade pupils, the success of the instrument is

determined not by how complete a descriptive grammar of each child we obtain, but by whether or not the pupils in question are properly placed. (It should be noted here that this arugment has nothing to do with the appropriateness of the objectives of a tesing program. Tests may, of course, be misused. What is at issue is merely the adequacy of limited behavior sampling as a means of achieving educational program objectives.)

Finally, the efficiency factor just mentioned should under no circumstances be considered trivial. The researcher's interest in seeking more complete data is natural and appropriate, but the realities of almost all language testing situations severely restrict the quantity of data we may expect to collect. On the other hand, these same constraints challenge us to make each test item as qualitatively significant as possible. And it is here perhaps that the advantages of repetition tasks become clear. Repetition test designers can build into their model utterances whatever performance data they wish to elicit from test subjects. They need not concern themselves with devising clever questions which may or may not result in the subject's initiating the linguistic behaviors of interest. That is, the repetition test designer and administrator do not spend time and effort trying to outwit the test subject.

APPLICATIONS

Sentence repetition data from hundreds of subjects have led us to view with confidence this assessment technique as an appropriate

means of evaluating a variety of language skills, including language production, comprehension, and dominance.

Oral Language Production

Even its critics concede that repetition provides an adequate means of determining a subject's control over various phonological and grammatical aspects of language production. The reproduction of sounds contained in model utterances, for example, can be easily evaluated, and problem sounds can be identified by their consistent substitution or misarticulation. The "sh-ch" sound distinction in English, for example, can be built into model utterances for Spanish speakers, and the successful or unsuccessful repetition of words containing these sounds can be readily determined. The same procedure may be used to investigate control over grammar. For example, the use of the third person present tense inflectional ending of English verbs can be assessed by including several such constructions in model utterances. A child will either repeat the model as provided, e.g., "Daddy goes to work" or he will say instead, "Daddy go to work" where the third person present tense marker is omitted. (It should be noted here that the interpretation given to deviations from model utterances, especially in the case of speakers of nonstandard dialects, is not at issue. To reiterate a point made earlier, we are interested here only in the capabilities of an assessment technique, not in how it may be used or misused within a given educational context.)

Listening Comprehension

It is clear from data we have collected that sentence repetition responses provide considerable information concerning comprehension. Successful repetitions indicate successful recognition of the model utterances; unsuccessful repetitions are usually readily divisible into problems of recognition or reproduction. For example, a child whose repetitions of Spanish sentences show no evidence of problems with the sounds in the word desayuna, may offer "La familia se duñas" for "La familia se desayuna". It may reasonably be hypothesized that the verb desayunarse is unfamiliar to this child. On the other hand, there are repetitions which, although not word-for-word reproductions of the model, do nonetheless reflect comprehension of the model. For example, a child may repeat "David puede abotonarse la camisa" as "David se puede abrochar la camisa," where it is clear that the child understood abotonarse, although he probably does not normally use this word. Another example of successful comprehension with inexact reproduction occurs when all or part of a Spanish model sentence is repeated by a bilingual child in its English equivalent, e.g., "Gloria tiene sus zapatos" becomes "Gloria got shoes."

Language Dominance

A sentence repetition task may also be utilized to assess the language dominance of bilingual children. Such a repetition test would, of course, include model utterances from the two languages of interest. Performance in each language can be

assessed, and the relative success in each language can be compared. One typical indicator of dominance is the decided preference for one of the two languages as manifested in the translation of model utterances from the less into the more dominant language. Thus in a Spanish-English test a Spanish-dominant child may consistently repeat Spanish utterances as modeled and translate many or all English models into Spanish, e.g., "The children drink milk" becomes "Los niños toman leche." The child's comprehension of English is obvious, but his preference for Spanish tends to indicate dominance in this language.

CONCLUSIONS

The objections to sentence repetition discussed in the first part of this paper are most successfully countered by an examination of performance data. First-hand acquaintance with actual subject performances in a sentence repetition task reveals that subjects do not perform like parrots, that they do not appear to be the victims of a bizarre and unnatural testing situation, and that they are not inhibited from considerable innovation and modification of the model utterances. Like subjects in most oral language testing formats, repetition test subjects who are made to feel at ease and who understand the task they are to perform invariably provide us with considerable information about their language competence. The repetition test must, of course, be carefully constructed, subjects' performances must be sensitively

reviewed, and generalizations about competencies carefully drawn, but this is not an exclusive requirement of repetition tests.

In sum, a well-designed repetition test provides an adequate means of assessing various aspects of language competence within the practical constraints typical of most language testing situations. And, it is perhaps on this practical level that repetition compares most favorably with other assessment techniques. Subjects performing sentence repetition tasks do not have to be relied upon to initiate the particular aspects of language performance we often circuitously seek using other techniques.

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